

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

A Song Must Be Sung

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, May 14, 2017

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

"Grow Your Soul & Serve the World"

328 Maple Street | Mahtomedi, Minnesota 55115

651.426.2369 | www.wbuuc.org

READINGS

From Billy Collins, "Questions About Angels"

Of all the questions you might want to ask
about angels, the only one you ever hear
is how many can dance on the head of a pin.

No curiosity about how they pass the eternal time
besides circling the Throne chanting in Latin
or delivering a crust of bread to a hermit on earth
or guiding a boy and girl across a rickety wooden bridge.

Do they fly through God's body and come out singing?
Do they swing like children from the hinges
of the spirit world saying their names backwards and forwards?
Do they sit alone in little gardens changing colors?

What about their sleeping habits, the fabric of their robes,
their diet of unfiltered divine light?
What goes on inside their luminous heads? Is there a wall
these tall presences can look over and see hell?

If an angel fell off a cloud, would he leave a hole
in a river and would the hole float along endlessly
filled with the silent letters of every angelic word?

If an angel delivered the mail, would he arrive
in a blinding rush of wings or would he just assume
the appearance of the regular mailman and
whistle up the driveway reading the postcards?

No, the medieval theologians control the court.
The only question you ever hear is about
the little dance floor on the head of a pin
where halos are meant to converge and drift invisibly.

(con't...)

It is designed to make us think in millions,
billions, to make us run out of numbers and collapse
into infinity, but perhaps the answer is simply one:
one female angel dancing alone in her stocking feet,
a small jazz combo working in the background.

She sways like a branch in the wind, her beautiful
eyes closed, and the tall thin bassist leans over
to glance at his watch because she has been dancing
forever, and now it is very late, even for musicians.

A reading from Carrie Newcomer, "Singing in the Kitchen"

My mother sang with full abandon
With the kitchen radio
When she was washing dishes.
She liked the old songs,
And she'd swing her hips,
Sashaying as much as a woman can
When elbow-deep in soapy water.

I would sit on the hardwood steps
Filled with pride and wonderment,
Whispering into my dog's ear,
With sage five year-old assurance,
"My mother has the voice of an angel."
As I recall, my dog agreed.

Years later,
Standing side by side on Sunday morning,
I was horrified,
In the way only a teenager can be horrified
When her mother is singing
Loudly and confidently,
Completely and consistently
Off key,
In church,
In public,
In front of her friends.

But now I understand
That my mother was a cautious soul,
Private and intentional,

And so I am grateful
That she taught me how to hold my little sister's hand
And look both ways before I crossed the street.

(con't...)

But I am also thankful
That either she did not know,
Or she did not care,
That her voice was not smooth or perfectly pitched.
She sang anyway,
Because some things just have to be
Exactly what they are,
And a song must be sung
One way or another.

A reading from Pat Schneider

Is there an angel in the house?
If there is, come to me...
and if you aren't too tired,
or otherwise occupied, and if it isn't too tacky a request,
please rock me.
I am bruised.
If you will hold me until morning, I promise I will rise and light the fire
and break the bread
and put back on my shoulder my corner of the world.
But for now I could use the shelter of a wing.
Excuse me,
Excuse me,
is there an angel in the house?

SERMON

*A pilgrim on a pilgrimage
Walked across the Brooklyn Bridge
His sneakers torn
In the hour when the homeless move their cardboard blankets
And the new day is born
Folded in his backpack pocket
The questions that he copied from his heart
Who am I in this lonely world?
And where will I make my bed tonight?
When twilight turns to dark
Questions for the angels
Who believes in angels?
Fools do
Fools and pilgrims all over the world*

These words are from Paul Simon, in a more recent song, *Questions for the Angels*.

*Who believes in angels?
Fools and pilgrims all over the world.*

What questions are copied from your heart,
folded in your backpack pocket –
*Who am I in this lonely world?
Who is with me?
Am I alone?*

These are ancient, and oh-so modern questions. Questions of what it means to be human, to be alive, to live in this world and make sense of it and find meaning and purpose and hope and courage.

For as much as I grew up open to and curious of the mystical, the mysterious world of religion and god and spirit, I always was skeptical of talk about angels – it seemed like not a Lutheran thing.

Maybe the de-mysticising of my soul happened at Bethlehem Lutheran Church on 2nd street in Mankato, when I was stopped in my tracks in the Narthex (the Lobby) and I saw Joel, the custodian, taking the red eternal flame behind the altar – and changing it out for a new candle.

I thought to myself – “good god, Joel does that?” I had assumed it was God, or the Holy Spirit, or something magical – but it was Joel, at 1:30 on a Tuesday afternoon, re-filling the “eternal” flame. The curtain had been opened...

So the mystical became, well, something to be questioned. Saints, sure – sinners, everyone – but angels – I thought of that more as a baseball team.

And when I became a Unitarian Universalist, it didn't cross my mind that there would be much talk about angels.

And then, came the Auction of 2016 – where members are able to bid on a sermon topic of their choice. So, Angels, it is. A good challenge.

Catherine Larson won the bidding, and she wrote these words about the topic of Angels:

The message I would hope people would receive is that angels are all around us. They are messengers sent by God, the Source or Universe.

They provide comfort, healing and guidance.

You will know your angels are with you—they send messages like feathers, coins, hugs, chills and maybe even talk to you.

Life is better each day if you spend some time resting and listening. Take the time to connect at a different level—there are many things to discover.

Connect at a different level – spend time resting and listening.

What a lovely invitation.

An invitation to notice and experience the world
as illumined, shot through with divinity –
in poetry, in metaphor, in wonder –
entering into the mystery
of connection to something beyond our own self,
beyond our own senses
beyond our own understanding.

In eastern Iowa, just off of highway 20,
also known as “the 4-lane”
is the city of Dyersville.

Some of you, especially if you love baseball,
know the place – because just outside of town is the sight of the movie
Field of Dreams.

It’s a mystical movie, I’m sure some of you have seen it –
where baseball players who were expelled from the game decades ago,
come back to play at this field
in the middle of a farm field
after the farmer has heard voices from beyond himself
beyond reason and rationality -
to *build this field*.

And they come back – like ghosts from another time,
ghosts who appear out from the corn field,
play baseball and rag on one another
and then vanish again
past the outfield, into the corn – gone.

In the questioning of the practical, pragmatic consequences
of Ray, the farmer, plowing over his field to build a ball field –
comes these words from their resident poet in the movie, one of my first
preaching instructors, played by James Earl Jones:

People will come, Ray. They'll come to Iowa for reasons they can't even fathom. They'll turn up your driveway not knowing for sure why they're doing it. They'll arrive at your door as innocent as children, longing for the past..And they'll walk out to the bleachers; sit in shirtsleeves on a perfect afternoon. They'll find where they sat when they were children and cheered their heroes. And they'll watch the game and it'll be as if they dipped themselves in magic waters. The memories will be so thick they'll have to brush them away from their faces. People will come Ray. This field, this game: it's a part of our past."

It is in sacred memory,
where we become the connection, the conduit
between what was and what is, and is yet to be.
To be dipped in magic waters
by entering into a frame of mind, of heart,
that orients our soul toward the mystical, the invisible,
the deeper dimensions of what it means to be alive.

It reminds me of this vale,
between one plane of reality and another –
this vale between life and death
of earth and angels –
it seems to be a much more permeable border
than we often think.

How often, do we remember
that there is a presence of loved ones gone,
a presence of souls we have loved,
who are never really gone –
are here, present,
in moments that surprise us,
moments that ground us,
in the reality of their spirit, like an angel,
on our shoulder.

Poet Janice Gould writes about the swaying, the movement,
of things visible and invisible,
during the day of the dead, through music.

She writes,

*I wish it were like this: el dia de los muertos comes
and we fill our baskets with bread, apples, chicken, and beer,
and go out to the graveyard.*

*We bring flowers with significant colors –
yellow, crimson, and gold –
the strong hungry colors of life, full of saliva and blood.
We sit on the sandy mounds
and I play my accordion.*

*It groans like the gates of hell.
The flames of the votives flicker in the wind.*

*My music makes everything sway,
all the visible and invisible -- friends, candles, ants, the wind.
Because for me life ripens, and for now it's on my side
though it's true I am often afraid.*

*I wear my boots when I play the old squeeze-box,
and stomp hard rhythms till the headstones dance on their graves.*

Our daughter Louisa's middle name is Lee.
Lee was Jenna's Dad's middle name,
who died earlier the same year
we found out we were expecting a child – Louisa.

We've begun to talk to her about being named for *Grandpa Gordon* –
someone she never met,
but whose presence is palpable in her family –
and in her name itself.

When my wife and her siblings were little,
their Dad, Gordon, would
make Owl sounds –
and say, “uh-oh, there's an owl in my tummy”

When Louisa was born,
the family was still on the threshold,
living in the permeable border and vale
between life lost and life begun -
so we filled her room with owls:
stuffed animals, wall hangings -
we literally blanketed her in owls -
not only when she was born,
but over these last few years -
thanks to instructions from google,
we even carved a watermelon
for her 1st birthday - into an owl.

Because we carry with us
that which is invisible -
we hold inside us
in imagery and memory and sacred presence -
the souls, like angels,
that guide our minds and hearts,
that comfort our souls.

I can't count the times I've heard from people grieving a loss
that they go to the cemetery,
sit on the grave,
and talk - out loud - to loved ones gone.

We fill our lives with their presence,
and even when we don't do it intentionally
their presence, influence, their heart and soul
permeate our very lives -
because we live in relationship and connection
to things past and present,
in ways we can name and notice,
and in ways only others might be able to see -
invisible, invisible.

Sufi Mystic Hafiz writes,

I can
See angels
Sitting on your ears,

Polishing trumpets,
Replacing lute strings,
Stretching new skins on the drums
And gathering wood for the evening's fire.

They all danced last night
But you did not
Hear Them.

If you ask Hafiz for advice
On how to befriend their sweet voices
And how to have the nourishing
Company of the finer worlds

I would reply,

"I could not say anything
You could not
Tell me."

I believe there are angels
whose wings are gracious arms
holding us when we are all but falling apart –
whose halos are like the type of smile
that affirms who you are
and makes you soul at home in their presence.

I believe in these types of angels –
that are made of blood and bone
and grounded in this earth
and yet whose spirits soar
and find a way to sing joy into the world,
to sing compassion and grace,

who have found a way to ground their heart in the heavens –
who bring with them an angelic presence
hearts of kindness, hands of service.

Do you know people like that?
Or feel the spirit of someone like that?
Who you can, because you can't imagine life any other way,
feel their presence,
and find comfort from them,
even in physical absence?

Carrie Newcomer wrote about listening to her mother
sing in the kitchen – at times loud and off key – even in public.

But it was a voice like an angel, she and her dog, agreed.

*A song must be sung –
one way or another she writes.*

Because that's what a song is for.

Because that's what relationships are –
we constantly save one another from despair,
lift each other toward hope again –
like angels from heaven that have rooted themselves in earth,
our hearts can open to a new awareness,
a new understanding,
where grace and gratitude find their entrance,
and the heart begins to sing.

It seems that what a soul is for –
a soul, which is beyond rational explanation, exactly,
must be connected to, supported by,
something that can feel intangible,
beyond the senses –
larger than our imagination
and not easily defined.

*A song must be sung – a should must be soulful –
connected to something that's deeper than pure logic.*

It shows up when people say,
I feel the presence of my ancestors.
That cardinal was a messenger from my loved one.
That hug, that handshake, that cup of coffee
was like a message from beyond
nourishing me,
sustaining my spirit, my soul,
in a way that I can't exactly explain.

At times it is the intangible,
the invisible meaning, symbol, presence,
through visible means
that remind us of our connection to each other,
and our connection to something larger than ourselves.

On a fall evening in central Minnesota,
a young man stopped his semi-truck
to check a noise from the engine.
On this small 2-lane country highway,
he got out into the growing darkness
as the sun finished setting
and was struck by another truck
coming down the narrow highway – he didn't survive.

The small town Catholic church was packed for the visitation.
A line extended from the open casket in front of the chancel, around the
sides of the sanctuary, down the stairs, zig zagged into the social hall,
and out the door into the sidewalks around the church. People waited
hours in that line to greet the family.

The young man's father in law
like any heart-filled hard-working Midwestern farmer would,
tried to contain his emotion,
as it spilled out in occasional gasps
and quiet tears
and held back wailing
while shaking his head –
why does God take the young ones

was the question that was haunting him.

He shook his head, there,
looking at the friends and family weeping at a young life lost –
looking at his daughter, now a widow,
with their baby, not even a year old.

Questions for the angels.
But that line,
that Sanctuary,
and not only because it was a Catholic Church –
was filled with angels.

The soul of that young father
the heart, the stories, love
of that short life
filled that room and spilled out the stained-glass windows
telling ancient stories
of love and hope in the midst of suffering and loss and pain.

And the souls of all those who had gone before –
in that community, in that family –
ancestors and common, ordinary saints of years gone by
echoed in the words of scriptures and hymns
family memories, the cries of newborn babes –

And that room was filled,
with angels who were opening doors
who were pouring coffee and serving bars and cookies
angels...
wrapping around that room,
wrapping around that family,
all these visible and invisible saints
like a lineage,
a linkage
a processional of saints
of love
and compassion
and heartbreak

that was shared and held in just the right way,
to mend hearts together again
as much as they could be.

There were angels in the room –
with testimony of strength and courage,
sacraments of meals and hugs,
those angels, winged and grounded,
held the space
with enough grief, and enough love,
so that the heart and soul
could find a way forward
and rise, and sing.

Is there an angel in the house? ...writes Pat Schneider...
If there is, come to me...
and if you aren't too tired,
or otherwise occupied, and if it isn't too tacky a request,
please rock me.
I am bruised.
If you will hold me until morning,
I promise I will rise and light the fire
and break the bread
and put back on my shoulder my corner of the world.
But for now I could use the shelter of a wing.
Excuse me,
Excuse me,
is there an angel in the house?

There are angels,
so other-worldly you can only feel them –
where you can't name or see or touch them
but know, on some level, like the soul, like the heart,
that they are the only thing holding you up
when all else falls away.

There are angels,
so earthly you can hold their hand,
hear their weeping as they sit with you in grief,

lean on them when your strength is wavering –
who get you a cup of a coffee
and bring over hot dish and jello salad
and lemon bars that will heal anyone.

There are angels
dancing on your shoulders
singing in the kitchen
walking through the farm field
and living inside the words and names
inscribed on our hearts.

There are angels
beyond number
spilling out and over the head of that pin,
flying through God
just above our head, below our feet,
within our heart –
and they come out singing.

There is a blackbird,
singing in the dead of night –
taking these sunken eyes and hearts,
these broken wings,
waiting for this moment
to arise, to fly –
to sing.

The hymn is Over My Head.